

Saudi Arabia

Country:

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Year:

2016

Press Freedom Status:

NF

PFS Score:

86

Legal Environment:

29

Political Environment:

32

Economic Environment:

25

Overview

Despite a change of administration, Saudi Arabia continues to have one of the most restricted media environments in the world. Although social media has provided a conduit for access to news, it too is being suppressed as the government seeks to silence criticism of its domestic policies and its war in Yemen.

Key Developments

- Writers and activists critical of the Saudi regime continued to face harsh punitive measures in 2015, something that remains unchanged despite changes wrought by the death of King Abdullah and the accession of King Salman.
- Amid the continuing military offensive in Yemen, the Saudi government aimed to shape media coverage, cracking down on domestic dissent and restricting access to Yemen by foreign journalists.

Legal Environment: 29 / 30

Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law, which covers mass media, does not guarantee freedom of the press, and the authorities are given broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition. The Basic Law also prohibits publishing materials that harm national security or that “detract from a man’s dignity.” Defamation is a criminal offense, and truth is not a recognized defense in such cases. The 2009 cybercrimes law criminalizes defamation on the internet. Any form of expression that insults Islam is potentially punishable by death, as is the crime of apostasy. The 2003 Printing and Publication Law governs the establishment of media outlets and stipulates penalties for press violations, such as fines and imprisonment. A 2005 royal decree transferred jurisdiction over the media from the court system to the Ministry of Culture and Information, which is authorized to shut down any outlet that it finds to have violated the press law. In addition, since 2011, all online newspapers and bloggers have been required to obtain a special license from the ministry. In practice, a variety of courts hear cases against traditional and online media outlets.

In 2011, as uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa gained momentum, the monarchy issued a decree banning the reporting of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic law), undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders. The decree amended several articles of the 2003 media law, allowing authorities to impose lifetime professional bans on journalists and levy fines of up to 500,000 riyals (\$133,000) for violations. Other amendments barred publication of anything harmful to the state and the coverage of trials without prior authorization from judicial officials.

The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Its Financing, which took effect in February 2014, defines terrorism as any action intended to “insult the reputation of the state,” “harm public order,” or “shake the security of society,” among other vague descriptions. The scope of the law raised concerns that it could be used to criminalize ordinary journalistic activity. Further regulations issued the following month allow police to make arrests for virtually any criticism of the government; ban “promoting” protests, meetings, or group statements, as well as anything that “harms the unity or stability of the kingdom by any means”; and target “sowing discord in society.”

A number of Saudi journalists remain jailed, including blogger Raif Badawi, who faces a 10-year prison sentence and 1,000 lashes in addition to a one-million-riyal fine. In December 2015, reformist writer Zuhair al-Kutbi was sentenced to four years in prison and a lengthy ban on writing and traveling after he called for political reforms on a talk show. The host of the show and another guest were banned from making media appearances for an unspecified amount of time. In October, Abdulkarim al-Khodr, cofounder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), was sentenced to 10 years in prison for various violations. Omar al-Saeed and Mikhlaif al-Shammari, both writers and human rights activists, were convicted of a similar litany of charges and jailed in November.

Saudi Arabia has no freedom of information law that provides for public access to state-held information, and officials do not disclose details related to sensitive topics such as government spending or allocations to the royal family.

Political Environment: 32 / 40 (↓1)

According to official media policy, the press should be a tool to educate the masses, propagate government views, and promote national unity. Media hews to views considered acceptable by the Saudi government and religious authorities; reporting critical of the Saudi system of governance or Wahhabi Islam is staunchly suppressed, as is unfavorable reporting on Saudi foreign and domestic policy. This has intensified amid the Saudi-led military coalition's ongoing offensive against Houthi rebels in Yemen: reporting that does not support the military action has been suppressed in local newspapers.

Despite the environment, nearly 70 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2015. Many Saudis have turned to the internet to express political opinions and expose government corruption. Saudi Arabia has as many as five million Twitter users, about half of whom are considered "active." Widespread discussion of a topic on Twitter often forces traditional news outlets to cover stories that would otherwise be considered too sensitive. The Saudi government has aimed to restrict online expression, unleashing a set of new laws in 2015 requiring online outlets to be registered and licensed. Since the onset of the war in Yemen, the Saudi government has sought to silence criticism of its military action on Twitter. Influential imams are pressured to support the war and curb their criticism of the government's policies on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Although they do not obstruct large, internationally hosted social-media platforms like Twitter, the authorities are able to monitor and block various websites with relative ease. These include those the government considers immoral, blasphemous, or critical of the regime. Politically sensitive websites, including those associated with the country's disadvantaged Shiite Muslim minority, are blocked routinely. Protests in Shiite areas are not covered by the local press unless the Ministry of Information releases an official statement. In February, the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) blocked more than 40 local news websites on the grounds that they had failed to acquire the necessary licenses.

The media have been allowed to observe and report on the functions of some state entities, such as the Shura Council, but access may be arbitrarily withdrawn and is not guaranteed by law.

The government has been known to directly censor both local and international media, and journalists routinely practice self-censorship and avoid criticism of the royal family, Islam, or religious authorities. Notably, key Riyadh-based regional satellite provider ArabSat suspended broadcasts of a number of channels in a move seen as tied to their frequent criticism of the kingdom's policies.

Physical harassment of journalists is relatively rare. However, both local and foreign reporters frequently face difficulty covering the news in person, especially when trying to access Eastern Province. The Saudi government has used its control of Yemen's land borders to limit access of foreign journalists to the war-torn country.

Economic Environment: 14 / 30

More than a dozen daily newspapers publish in Saudi Arabia. All are privately owned but controlled by individuals affiliated with the royal family. Members of the royal family also control two popular London-based dailies, *Asharq al-Aswat* and *Al-Hayat*, that serve a wider Arab audience. The government owns and operates all terrestrial television and radio stations. Although satellite dishes are illegal, satellite television has become widespread and is an important source of foreign news. Key regional satellite channels, including the popular Al-Arabiya news channel, are controlled by Saudi investors and adhere to local media norms.

Owing to the high costs of entry, the ability to establish digital media outlets is largely limited. Regulations passed in 2015 requiring online sites to have physical offices have further raised the cost of entry.

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